DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 433 CS 217 640

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TITLE Writing History: Writing Assignment Design and Evaluation in Two American History Survey Courses.

PUB DATE 2001-05-00

NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Writing across the Curriculum Conference (5th, Bloomington, IN, May 31-June 2, 2001).

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Introductory Courses; *United States History; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Evaluation

IDENTIFIERS *Idaho State University; *Writing to Learn

ABSTRACT

This interactive panel discussion paper by three educators focuses on the design and evaluation process of writing assignments in two American History survey courses at Idaho State University. The paper states that both approaches used--student-centered, and authentic writing to communicate--offer two different perspectives on using writing-to-learn assignments in introductory history courses, since both reflect particular views of how history is practiced and taught. In the paper, the Writing Center director, focusing on the discipline-specific nature of writing in history and history courses, collaborates with members of the history department to design assessment and evaluation approaches for writing assignment in history survey courses. One instructor describes how to use creative writing assignments that present history in a thematic, interpretive fashion to expose students to the narrative flow of history and help students learn and communicate the historical material presented in survey courses. Another instructor finds that writing to learn assignments encourage students to demonstrate an understanding of the focus of a given topic by explaining the concept or discussing how to investigate the problem and by applying the topic to solve problems in history studies. (NKA)

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Writing History: Writing Assignment Design and Evaluation in Two American History Survey Courses

by Stephen Adkison, Laura Woodworth-Ney and Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler

Paper presented at the National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (5th, Bloomington, IN, May 31-June 2, 2001)

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Writing History:

Writing Assignment Design and Evaluation in Two American History Survey Courses

Panel Overview: This interactive panel discussion focuses on the design and evaluation process of writing assignments in two American History survey courses at Idaho State University. Based on student-centered and authentic writing to communicate approaches, both approaches offer two different perspectives on using writing-to-learn assignments in introductory history courses. Each approach reflects particular views of how history is practiced and taught.

Steve Adkison

Developing Discipline-Specific WAC Consultancies Through Focused Inquiry

Presentation Abstract:

Focusing on the discipline-specific nature of writing in history and history courses, the Writing Center Director at Idaho State University collaborates with members of the history department to design assessment and evaluation approaches for writing assignments in history survey courses.

Presentation Summary:

The Writing Center Director at Idaho State University serves as a resource for university faculty in supporting writing across the curriculum in General Education courses and in all the disciplines. This writing center mission reflects the need for students to write

and reason effectively, and strongly supports the development of writing abilities as a university-wide endeavor. As a Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines consultant, the director provides the collaborative expertise to help faculty with the following: development of writing assignments appropriate to courses in the various disciplines; creation of accurate and efficient instruments for evaluating student writing, and the introduction of collaborative learning strategies for students. Based on a model of collaborative inquiry for writing across the curriculum developed by Dr. Mark Waldo at the University of Nevada, this approach to writing assignment design and evaluation begins with focused questioning aimed at helping faculty members to articulate their own values for writing as both teachers and practicing professionals, and to communicate as well how writing functions in their classrooms and in their discipline in general.

We began this collaboration between history faculty teaching the American history survey courses and the writing center with a similar period of questioning and articulating answers over a course of several meetings. One of the more interesting results of our efforts at describing how faculty already used writing assignments in their classes and how they wanted to further develop writing assignments centered on two different approaches being used by two different teachers. Both effective, each approach nonetheless reflected two different approaches to the practice of history and, as a result, to the use of writing assignments as teaching tools in the history classroom. The first of these approaches, according to Laura Woodworth-Ney, presents "historical material in a thematic, interpretive fashion that exposes students to the narrative flow

of history and to differing interpretations of historical events." The second approach, discussed by Ron Hatzenbuehler shortly, views history as a process of solving problems, a social process in which students "demonstrate an understanding of the focus by applying the topic or explaining the concept or discussing how to investigate the problem."

Laura Woodworth-Ney

"This Is Not An English Class!": Using Creative Writing Assignments in the History

Survey Course Presentation Abstract:

Writing assignments that present history in a thematic, interpretive fashion expose students to the narrative flow of history and help students learn and communicate the historical material presented in survey courses.

Presentation Summary:

"This is not an English class." The occasional appearance of this phrase on teaching evaluations, and the relentless student cry for "multiple choice" exams, have not dissuaded me from continuing to assign writing in the introductory history surveys that I teach. I remain convinced that writing assignments help students learn and communicate the historical material presented in the survey courses.

My goal is to present historical material in a thematic, interpretive fashion that exposes students to the narrative flow of history and to differing interpretations of historical events. Freshmen students often perceive history as a series of "important events" and "influential people" randomly linked by dates. To counter this view, I attempt to present history as a river, sometimes raging, sometimes placid, that encompasses all of human experience in a given time frame. The river s flow is not necessarily linear--sometimes it is circular--but the river's beginning is always connected to its end. I hope that this will help students recognize the significance of historical knowledge--that the past is not separate from the present. Inherent in this objective is the ability of students to identify the relationship between historical understanding and the kind of language (textual and nontextual) that cultures employ to describe their pasts. Appreciation of cultural language--literature, art, diaries, letters--helps students recognize the human "story" in history.

I assign a first-person narrative assignment that requires each student to assume the identity of an individual living during the time period covered in the class. The "You Are There" assignment allows students to focus on a theme, event, or an individual that particularly interests them, within well-defined parameters. Successful papers demonstrate the ability to convert specific historical knowledge into a personal narrative. Instances of plagiarism have been rare on this assignment, as students are forced to communicate historical information in a format very different from that of their textbook or other secondary sources. This exercise also introduces students to

larger questions of historical documentation and language: How does the use of language influence our understanding of the past? Does a poorly written diary entry tell us more (or less) about an event than a formal textbook description? Can we understand history if we don92t understand something about the feelings and emotions of the people who experienced the past?

The "You Are There" paper has produced some wildly creative results: the Civil War from the point-of-view of Robert E. Lee's horse, Traveler; an account of the Astorian fur trade from the perspective of an articulate and well-spoken beaver; a detailed scrapbook of a World War I soldier. It is successful papers such as these that, in spite of the "this is not English" complaint, lift my spirits and inspire me to continue to assign creative writing assignments in the history survey courses.

Ron Hatzenbuehler

"This is Not a 100-Level Class!": History as Focused Discussions in the History Survey Course

Presentation Abstract:

Writing to learn assignments encourage students to demonstrate an understanding of the focus of a given topic by explaining the concept or discussing how to investigate the problem and by applying the topic to solve problems in history studies.

Presentation Summary:

The biggest problem I see these days with my students in lower division classes is that they are passive, rather than active, learners. Robert Barr and John Tagg ("From Teaching to Learning--A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education", Change [Nov./Dec. 1995]) may have exaggerated the dichotomy between teaching and learning, but their position is valid to the extent that we need to shift our universities from being places that provide instruction to institutions that produce learning. Using different language, Vincent Tinto has observed in numerous publications (e.g., Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition [Chicago, 1993]) that universities should provide an environment in which learning can occur.

For most of my career, I provided instruction, primarily through lectures. Exams (typically essay in format) and out-of-class assignments required students to demonstrate that they could synthesize material from class and assigned readings and present their ideas persuasively. I began to lose interest in this approach, however, when it became apparent that my better students weren't learning very much from this approach. Indeed, one of my own greatest learning experiences as a faculty member came when talking with one of my students who was telling me that the class he had attended the day before was "excellent, remarkable, and truly enjoyable." "Oh yeah," I said, "what did you learn?" When the student couldn't tell me, I knew something was wrong.

So, I don't lecture. Rather, I try to conduct what I would call focused discussions in small groups and with the whole class around a topic, concept or problem. Students are supposed to prepare answers to "learning objectives" that I craft from the chapters in their text, so that they can participate actively in the investigation. Although some students in introductory classes are intimidated to speak in public, with practice they can become active learners.

On tests, I don't require students to write essay answers anymore, opting instead for focused questions related to the topics, concepts and problems that we've investigated in class. I typically construct a test where students choose to answer 50 percent of the questions, which combine class presentations, material from the text and readings from a web site constructed by the publisher of the text. In constructing test questions, I give students the focus for the question and require them to demonstrate an understanding of the focus by applying the topic or explaining the concept or discussing how to investigate the problem. The question also has multiple parts designed to see if they can see linkages or follow trails of investigation. Finally, students must provide sufficient detail for me to judge how deeply they know the material. In other words, I'm primarily interested in what they know about the areas in which they've chosen to pursue this extended investigation. Using a rubric that specifies each of these points, students who want to improve can see where, in my judgment, they have done well or need some additional work.

Finally, I've learned to accept the fact that I can't force people to learn; I can, however, help them to practice critical thinking skills and learn how to communicate in writing what they know. I can't say that I've succeeded yet in this goal, but it's a lot more fun trying than it used to be when I felt I was responsible for providing instruction.